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CHALLENGES FOR DIAKONIA IN THE CONTEMPORARY NORWEGIAN SOCIETY¹

*Desafios à diakonia
na sociedade norueguesa contemporânea*

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Abstract: Diaconal actions are always conditioned and challenged by concrete contexts, and all contexts are multifaceted and require an interdisciplinary approach. This article describes challenges for diakonia in the contemporary Norwegian society through the framework of Plan for Diakonia, a plan document made for the whole Church of Norway accepted by the General Synod in 2007. The Church of Norway today is talking about diakonia as a feature of the total mission of the church, also explained as a dimension of being church. In the article the deacons' profession and work in the parishes will be presented, but also the diaconal work which is undertaken by diaconal organizations and institutions together with and integrated into the welfare state. It goes beyond the scope of this article to look fully into the welfare state concept, but the Coordination Reform of Health Service from 2008/9 will be used as an example of how a white paper from the Ministry of Health and Care services underlines that church organizations are a great resource and important actors in the Norwegian society. In the end of the article I underline the importance for diakonia to have a clear engagement in society. The diaconal work needs to change as society changes. One cannot linger on old methods and ways; diaconal actions must develop and innovate with the world in order to understand the world.

Keywords: Diakonia. Church of Norway. Diaconal Institutions and Organizations. Deacons.

Resumo: Ações diaconais são sempre condicionadas e desafiadas pelos contextos concretos, e todos os contextos são multifacetados e exigem uma abordagem interdisciplinar. Este artigo descreve os desafios para a diakonia na sociedade

¹ O artigo foi recebido em 06 de setembro de 2015 e aprovado em 23 de outubro de 2015 com base nas avaliações dos pareceristas *ad hoc*.

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contemporânea da Noruega através da estrutura do *Plano para Diaconia*, um documento de planejamento para toda a Igreja da Noruega aceito pelo Sínodo Geral em 2007. A Igreja da Noruega hoje está falando sobre diaconia como uma característica da missão total da igreja, também explicado como uma dimensão do ser igreja. No artigo a profissão e o trabalho das pessoas diaconais nas paróquias serão apresentadas, mas também será apresentado o trabalho diaconal que é feito pelas organizações e instituições diaconais junto com e integrado ao estado welfarista. Vai além do escopo deste artigo adentrar mais profundamente o conceito de estado welfarista, mas a Reforma Coordenada dos Serviços de Saúde de 2008/9 será usada como um exemplo de como uma “carta branca” do Ministério da Saúde e de Serviços de Cuidado enfatiza que organizações eclesiais são um recurso enorme e são atores importantes na sociedade norueguesa. No fim do artigo, sublinho a importância de a diaconia ter um engajamento claro na sociedade. O trabalho diaconal precisa mudar à medida que a sociedade muda. Não se pode perdurar em métodos e caminhos antigos; ações diaconais precisam desenvolver e inovar com o mundo a fim de entender o mundo.

Palavras-chave: Diaconia. Igreja da Noruega. Instituições e organizações diaconais. Pessoas diaconais.

Introduction

The Church of Norway is an Evangelical Lutheran Church with roots back to 1537. It has been a state church since the Reformation and until 2012. Around 75 per cent of Norway’s population are currently baptized members. In the new wording of the Constitution there is no longer reference to an “official religion of the State.” Article 2 in the Constitution now says that Norway’s values are based on its Christian and humanist heritage.³

Diakonia has been part of the Christian Church since its beginning. The organization of diakonia and its expressions have varied, but a caring ministry has been upheld in all periods. The Protestant renewal of diakonia in the 19th century is looked upon as the starting-point for diaconal ministry as we know it in Norway today. The diaconal revival in Germany inspired church leaders in Norway to establish diaconal institutions focusing on caritative work and education, especially within social work and nursing. Over the years this led to a stronger rise of congregational diakonia as well, and during the last years the Church of Norway has emphasized the importance of its self-understanding as a diaconal church.

Diaconal actions are always conditioned and challenged by concrete contexts, and all contexts are multifaceted and require an interdisciplinary approach. In this article I will look upon challenges for diakonia in the contemporary Norwegian society through the framework of Plan for Diakonia, a plan document made for the whole Church of Norway accepted by the General Synod in 2007⁴. This plan document gives a definition of diakonia that I will present and comment on.

³ Church of Norway 2015

⁴ Church of Norway 2008

Deacons are being trained and ordained to the diaconal ministry in the Church of Norway. This is different from many other churches' understanding of the ministry of the deacons, so I will focus on the deacons' profession and challenges in the local parishes. Deacons are often bridge-builders between the church and the local community because their activities bring them in contact with people outside the church and also at the margins of the society.

A great deal of diaconal work is undertaken by diaconal organizations and institutions together with and integrated into the welfare state. It is financed to a large extent by the welfare state system and can be seen as a controlled complement or supplement to the welfare state.⁵ Other possible relations between church and state will be mentioned, but it goes beyond the scope of this article to look fully into the welfare state concept.

In the end of the article I will briefly mention one of the most current challenges for diakonia in the contemporary Norwegian society through the so-called *Samhandlingsreformen* (Coordination Reform of Health Service). This reform from the Norwegian Parliament encourages a stronger relation between the church and the public health service in the Norwegian society because the reform aims at giving more responsibility to the local communities and underlines that voluntary work is of great importance in society. Also other documents produced the last years are focusing on how the different actors in the society need to cooperate in health and social services to the people, and the churches are looked upon as important contributors.

Plan for diakonia in the Church of Norway

In 1987 the first Plan for diakonia in the Church of Norway was adopted by the General Synod. In 1997 the Plan was updated in accordance with current laws and regulations. In November 2007 the General Synod adopted a new Plan for Diakonia, and the plan also presented a new definition of diakonia. The changes in the definition of diakonia express how the view of diaconal ministry has gradually emerged within the Church of Norway over the last twenty years. However, there are many local variations and traditions that together form an inspiring whole.

The vision for the diaconal ministry in the Church of Norway is expressed in the following way: The love of God for all people and the whole creation revealed throughout life and service.⁶

The plan is based on the following definition of diakonia: Diakonia is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice.⁷

⁵ Vetvik 2011:123

⁶ Church of Norway 2008:4

⁷ Ibid: 5

The Church of Norway today is talking about diakonia as a feature of the total mission of the church, also explained as a dimension of being church. It is the Gospel in action, as mentioned in the definition. Diakonia should be a principle in all aspects of parish life, and result in practical measures. To practice diakonia is to serve human beings, the created world, and in this way to serve God. Diakonia will always have a special responsibility in cases where nobody else takes care.⁸ In a document from The Lutheran World Federation called *Diakonia in context* we can find the same perspective on diakonia as in the document from the Church of Norway.

Diakonia is thus an intrinsic element of being Church and cannot be reduced to an activity by certain committed persons or made necessary by external social conditions. Diakonia is deeply related to what the Church celebrates in its liturgy and announces in its preaching. In the same way, liturgy and proclamation relate to diakonia. The communion (koinonia) of the Church is made visible through its three main expressions.⁹

The first part of the plan document explains the theological basis of diakonia; the faith in the Triune God as Father and Creator, Son and Saviour, and Holy Spirit – the spirit of life. All human beings are created in God's image and meant to live in relationship with Him, each other and all creation. Nobody can live for himself or by himself, and all human being are set to serve each other and to care for one another. The faith in God involves responsibility for the whole of creation.

The plan expresses that because God loved us first and showed this through the life and death of Jesus Christ, we are able to love and respect any other person. Through baptism everybody becomes partakers in Christ and members of the worldwide church. All Christians are challenged to live a daily life in service for others and for the whole of creation. This applies to all age groups. Diakonia is a key note in all parish life and is at the same time expressed directly in practical measures. As mentioned, diakonia has a special responsibility where few or none are caring. Mutuality and respect for the dignity of others is fundamental. The plan speaks of all persons as gifted and able to participate in diakonia.

All Christians are called to respond when other human beings are facing smaller or bigger crises. The plan calls this *general diakonia*.¹⁰ An important biblical text is found in Matthew 25:31-46 where the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned are mentioned as being in need of care and attention. And Christ says that "in as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me".¹¹

In an article about *Diakonia in the Nordic region*,¹² Stephanie Dietrich also underline the same point when she writes; "There has been a growing consciousness

⁸ Ibid

⁹ LWF 2009:29

¹⁰ Church of Norway 2008:9

¹¹ The holy Bible, New King James Version

¹² Dietrich 2009:67

of the importance of Christian life as an integral part of being a Christian, not only a consequence.”

Diaconal activities have often been carried out as charitable work where there has been a defined giver and likewise a defined receiver. This relation has often made the receiver an object for the giver as a subject. From a Christian point of view nobody should ever be an object for another person. Every human being is a subject in his or her life, and every human being is a subject in the image of God. It is important that diakonia demonstrates this by mutuality and respect in the relations. This does not mean that everybody is alike, but the value of the human being is the same no matter the conditions he or she is living under. During life the situations will change for everybody. One time you may be in the position of giving to somebody else. Another time you may be in a situation where you need to receive help from others. In all situations we are subjects who are meeting others in a subject-subject-, not in a subject-object-, relation.

Globalization is a particular challenge for diakonia. Cultural and ethnic diversity is reflected in parish life. Suffering human beings are the concern of the churches, whether they are living nearby or in other countries. Care for creation is a global and a local responsibility.

In the national plan document cooperation in this field is especially underlined. It is said that:

Cooperation is vital and offers numerous possibilities. It is recommended to seek cooperation within the Church, with other churches, with organizations and institutions, with public services and also with groups representing other faiths. It is important to have a broad approach to diakonia, by seeing parish diakonia in relation to the service of diaconal institutions and organizations.¹³

The basic understanding of diakonia theologically is as part of the mission that God has given the Church, and which is expressed in the common Christian faith. Diakonia is being, as well as doing, and it is a concern for all believers. To transform faith into action means to ask time and time again: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10, 29-37). It means also to place oneself at disposal, as a community and as individuals, and be willing to ask: “What do you want me to do for you?” (Luke 18,41).

In order to be done systematically and to be a continuously part of the life of the Church, diakonia needs structures and leadership. Therefore diakonia can be organized by deacons and diaconal workers to help individuals and groups with different needs on behalf of the parishes. The plan calls this *organized diakonia*.¹⁴ Plans and guidelines for this work are made in the parishes by the parish councils. Deacons lead the local diaconal work and also have the responsibility to recruit, equip and guide the volunteers.

¹³ Church of Norway 2008:5

¹⁴ Ibid: 9

The third expression of diakonia is called the *specialized diaconal ministry*¹⁵, and this is the work done by a numerous of institutions and organizations working both nationally and internationally within the framework of the Church of Norway's confessional basis. Diaconal challenges can require efforts that go beyond what can be organized on a parish level, and often specialized skills or experiences are called for. Specialized diakonia is practiced for example when a parish or several parishes own and run diaconal institutions, such as homes for elderly people or kindergartens. But within this category there are also independent diaconal institutions with more solid structures that regard themselves linked to the church, and do their work on behalf of the church. Hospitals are examples of specialized diakonia where very specialized skills and equipment are needed. Although these institutions is financed to a large extent by the welfare state system and function as health and social institutions according to governmental norms and requirements, there are still links between diaconal institutions, the national church and the local parishes.

Some specialized diaconal organizations, such as the Norwegian Church Aid, can also be said to exercise *international diakonia*. Diakonia in the world today must be international and relate to the concept of the church as a world-wide community. "The conception of the church as a global reality although always rooted in a local context and in the expression of a local community of believers, belongs to the Christian faith," Nordstokke writes in an article about international diakonia.¹⁶ The need for diaconal ministry in other parts of the world has led parishes and diaconal institutions and organizations to engage in various mission and development aid programs¹⁷. Many parishes in Norway have established friendship-agreement with parishes in other parts of the world. These agreements are a result of the mutual respect and concern for each other and the wish to be part of each other's lives. They are also underlining that we know that both parts in this relation have something to give and something to gain.

It is worth mentioning that different movements in the churches all over the world, and so also in the Church of Norway, have motivated for a stronger ecumenical cooperation expressed in documents and various agreements. The ecumenical movement expresses the importance of the calling and commitment to seek church fellowship with other churches where it is possible, and the call to learn from and share gifts with other churches.¹⁸ This can be seen in the diaconal field as well. The commitments recognize that the challenges of responding to the needs of people in parts of the world today are too large for one single church or agency to handle. Bilateral cooperation has grown to be the most common form of international diakonia today.

The definition in the plan document expresses an intended direction for diaconal work also by pointing out fur focus areas for deaconal work, loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice. The

¹⁵ Ibid: 9

¹⁶ Nordstokke 2011:1

¹⁷ Church of Norway 2008:9

¹⁸ <http://www.kirken.no/english/engelsk.cfm?artid=5897>

main purpose of a central document like this is that the local parishes shall be inspired to make their local plans for diakonia on the main elements from this plan. The second half of the Plan for Diakonia presents diaconal needs in the society today to point out challenges and areas of engagement, but it also gives guidance for drawing up plans and carrying out diaconal work in the local parishes. Locally it is important to relate the plan to local needs, personal and economic resources and possibilities for cooperation inside and outside the church.

Because this mentioned plan document relates most to the diaconal work in the parishes, there has also been made a plan document for the diaconal institutions.

Diaconal institutions and organizations

As already mentioned the diaconal institutions in Norway were established as a result of the strong influence of the diaconal revival in Germany in the 19th century. The institutions were understood as a response to the needs and troubles of the time. They were established by individuals or small groups of people and not by the official church structures. This freedom from official church structures has been upheld until today, and even if the institutions have based their work on the Christian church's values and believes, there is still a certain distance between diaconal institutions and official church structures. Many of the diaconal institutions, such as hospitals, nursing homes and university colleges, are defined as a part of the official welfare and education system in today's society. They are mainly financed through the general tax systems, but they have an independency in deciding their basic values.¹⁹

Research shows that the percentage of the work in health and social welfare done by diaconal institutions have decreased the last 25 years, but not very much. Today the results show that about 8% of the health and social institutions in Norway are run by churches, not only the Church of Norway. The diaconal institutions' main areas are care for elderly, somatic health care and care for drug addicts. One of the reasons for the decrease may be that it is very demanding to run institutions in today's complex society. It may be difficult to define what is the difference between a diaconal and a secular institution. In the 1970 and 80 there was a strong focus on neutralism and equality in the welfare state, and the diaconal institutions had to weaken their focus on religious values. In the 1990-ies the official welfare focus was more on quality which opened up for a bigger variety of services and the growing pluralism. "Good Praxis" was the clue, and the voluntary work was also welcomed in as a supplement to the official welfare. For diakonia this opened up for a stronger focus on the religious identity of the institutions, and new diaconal institutions were also established in this period. After the millennium, the focus on quality and pluralism has increased but at the same time the officials are more focused on efficiency and competition. This has pushed the diaconal institutions even more to focus on their identity.²⁰

¹⁹ Dietrich 2009

²⁰ Aadland 2009

It is a matter of big concern within the diaconal institutions today of preserving the values while being active in the competitive market. Economic stability is a primary concern of all care providers, diaconal or other, and there is a growing acceptance of the need to be business minded and provide services. Along with competition and the need to adopt business models, comes a growing fear of forgetting the diaconal background and origin in finding oneself moving further and further away from the diaconal purpose.

Another major challenge is the pluralistic society of today. How is it possible to uphold a specific diaconal identity in a pluralistic society? In earlier times it was easier to rely on the employees' personal identity connected to Christian belief. In the modern, very specialized and pluralistic society this is not an easy thing. The employees, the students, and the users of the institutions – all represent the pluralism in society. Building the identity of an institution is therefore a big challenge for the leaders, and will demand that the leaders themselves can identify with the institution's goals and values. Diaconal institutions are challenged by the fact that they on the one hand shall operate in the sphere between religion and society, handling both the mandate from the church and the public. On the other hand the institutions shall move in the sphere between profession and faith, which can be difficult in the situations of recruiting new employees when the institutions all the time are required to offer the highest professional competency.²¹

There are also several diaconal organizations in Norway working with diakonia in the society in different ways. One of them is the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA). NCA present itself as an ecumenical diaconal organization for global justice. The work is carried out with no intention of influencing people's religious affiliation. NCA struggles together with people and organizations across the world to eradicate poverty and injustice. The organization has three main working methods: long-term development work, emergency preparedness and response, and advocacy. Each of these is equally important if we are to realize basic human rights and defend human dignity around the world.²²

Another important diaconal foundation in the Norway is the Church City Mission (*Kirkens Bymisjon*). They are doing social work within care for alcoholics, elderly care, child welfare, mental health care and among prostitutes – as well as religious activities such as pastoral care, preaching and church work.

Several more diaconal organizations could be mentioned because they do important diaconal work in the Norwegian society, and they are valued as important contributors in the Norwegian welfare state.

²¹ Askeland 2011:1

²² Kirkens Nødhjelp 2015

Deacons in the Church of Norway

Deacons and deaconesses have since the end of the 19th century been trained and employed for diaconal work. There has been a lot of discussion during the history regarding the nature and role of diaconal ministry, and the General Synod of the Church of Norway has had the question on the agenda several times. The meeting in 2004 concluded that the deacon's ministry could be understood as part of the ordained ministry in the Church of Norway.

This emphasis on diaconal ministry as part of the ordained ministry can be seen as a result of the ecumenical development in recent years, especially life within the Porvoo Communion, which includes the obligation to work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry. It is also a result of the growing understanding that diaconal work is not a free choice for a church, but a part of being church and, as such, an obligation.²³

The General Synod saw the need for a better understanding of the consequences of this statement in relation to areas concerning church order, ordination, relations to other ministries etc. The process was protracted, but in 2011 the question was on the agenda for the General Synod again. The Synod decided that the ministry of deacons is an independent and necessary ministry within the framework of the fellowship and ministries of the Church of Norway. The ministry of the deacon is based on an independent theological foundation and is primarily understood as a caring ministry. The ministry of deacons is an ordained ministry, and this ordination is an ordination to a distinct ministry.²⁴

There should, however, be a change in attitude in the Church of Norway on the question of permanence, towards better follow-up and the shaping of facilities which will enable deacons to remain in the church for life-long service. Too many deacons, especially young ones, work for a short time, before changing over to secular posts or starting further study for the priesthood.²⁵

Deacons today are trained at a master's level. They have a bachelor degree in health or social work or teacher training, and then a master's degree in diakonia which consists of theological and diaconal studies and also internships in the practical field of diakonia. Most deacons are employed as permanent deacons in the Church of Norway. Some are also engaged in the health and social work run by the state. The Church of Norway has 275 positions which are about 250 man-labor years. There are not deacons in all the parishes, due to economic priorities, but also to the fact that the Church itself has been unclear about the position of the deacons' ministry. Compared to the total number of employees in the Church of Norway, the deacons make up for 5-6%.²⁶

²³ Dietrich 2009:67-68

²⁴ Kirkerådet 2011

²⁵ Fanuelsen 2013

²⁶ <http://www.ka.no/sok/artikkelvisning/article/31000>

The deacon is the leader of the deaconate in one parish or more parishes in the same area. In the Church of Norway there is a set of written directives for the service of the deacons. The directives tell that the deacon is a leader of the diaconate and has a joint responsibility to recruit, equip and supervise the volunteers. The employer decides which tasks the deacon shall perform within the framework of the existing plans. Within these frames the deacon has independent responsibility to perform his/her tasks.

Besides the ordained deacons there are some employed diaconal workers in the parishes, which means workers that are not fully educated as deacons, but they have the responsibility for parts of the diaconal work, for example the visiting-group. Still quite a few parishes don't have any special competence in diakonia at all.

There are also a few ordained deacons working in institutions, for example in diaconal hospitals and in the City Mission, but there is a lot of people with diaconal education but without ordination working in such institutions and organizations. Other denominations in Norway are mostly having their diaconal activity done by volunteers. But the Methodist Church has been working over quite a few years to establish a more permanent ministry for deacons, and today they have some ordained deacons in institutions and parishes.

Deacons may have different tasks and profiles according to local needs and variations.

The deacons work with preventive activities, with caring and empowerment activities. The deacons are especially called to meet people in difficult life-situations no matter the individuals' social status, culture, religion etc. They shall be especially concerned about those who are marginalized in the society, and shall work with the building up of inclusive communities.²⁷ To care for the creation, as the definition says, is also to protect the life-environment for people. In Norway there is a big project these days to make all the parishes "green" as a part of the responsibility for climate changes and for nature in general. Struggling for justice can also be done in different ways. It may be expressed through the involvement in international work to protect human rights and showing solidarity in sharing. But it may also happen locally in standing up for the marginalized or excluded in the local community. It may be called to do advocacy work, to be a strategic witness with, and on behalf of, those who are marginalized and vulnerable or whose voices have been silenced.²⁸ Deacons work with different age-groups but may have focus on some special groups as well. They work quite a bit with recruiting and supporting volunteers, and it is important for the deacons to work together with all people of good will, either they belong to the church or not, to be able to meet and support people in difficult life situations. In many ways the deacon is a bridge-builder between the church and the society. Some congregations have defined needs that give the deacons work a special profile, for example "youth deacons" working especially towards young people. They work with

²⁷ <http://www.diakonforbundet.no/index.php/diakon>

²⁸ LWF 2009:94

youth-groups of different kinds or confirmation classes, and especially towards young people in difficult life-situations who really need somebody to talk to.

In a more detailed view, we can see that deacons often arrange different groups for people in grief and crises, a type of self-help-groups where people meet and can be allowed to talk about their loss connected to death, divorce, loss of functions, loss of job etc. The deacons often have given pastoral care towards elderly people or to people in palliative care. They are also asked to counsel people working in care-taking situations. A lot of deacons work with families in different ways; having marriage-courses, home-start-groups, baby-singing, family arrangement like dinners and gatherings for parents and children. Families with children with chronic diseases or children with physical or psychological retardations will also often need some special support.

Norway is more multicultural than before and deacons are also working with immigrants in different ways, especially the women, and there are a lot of different women groups focused on activities together learning the new language, gymnastic activities, cooking, sowing and knitting etc. You can also find deacons working towards asylum-seekers in different ways.

In the ancient church, the deacon was called “the ear and the mouth of the bishop.” It was the deacon – as a go-between – who had the responsibility to bring the stories from the margins, from the lives of the poor and the sick back into the church. The mission of go-between is successful if distances (social, cultural, religious etc.) can be bridged. When this happens, diaconal action can contribute to transformation of the Church – both at its center and in the periphery. All diaconal actions, including those addressing immediate needs, are embedded in a comprehensive mandate of building relationships. As a diaconal method, accompaniment seeks to overcome isolation and exclusion, and to identify pathways that may offer possibilities for a broader sharing in mutual solidarity. A go-between needs the capacity to listen to different versions of a story, and to see why such differences emerge. Then there is necessity of really going between, of building bridges of understanding and acceptance. Again, this is related to communion building, of identifying processes of reconciliation and of inclusion. There are endless situations which call for the diaconal action of bridge-building, both inside and outside the Church.

A go-between cannot be silent. Communication is a basic component of bridge-building.

This communication often needs to be patient and diplomatic, but there are also situations when communication has to be prophetic and to lift up the voice of the silent and the suffering.²⁹

²⁹ LWF 2009:47

Diakonia in the Norwegian welfare state

It goes beyond the scope of this article to be very detailed about the total context for diakonia in Norway, but I will very briefly give some outlines of the Norwegian society as a welfare state to be able to discuss what diakonia can mean in contemporary society. The Church of Norway is both a community of believers and part of the public administration.³⁰ The Norwegian welfare state has an extensive social security system, institutionalized social rights that express solidarity and universality. The system is supposed to cover everybody regardless of social and economic status.

What distinguishes the Norwegian welfare state is the relationship between the public sector and the labor market with a large public sector, a system of “full employment” and a higher labor market rate for women, a wide-embracing system of more or less universal rights, a residual system of social assistance and a comparatively strong element of vertical re-distribution.³¹

One of the main ideas behind this system of universalistic orientation is that it protects its members against social risks connected with normal work and family life, and as long as the members are active in the labor market, the national insurance system will protect the individual and the family against poverty. But the problem is of course the situation for those who are not integrated into the labor market because they are not able to work or they are excluded because of other reasons. The source of income for those who are not directly or indirectly integrated in the labor market is a needs-based social assistance.³²

The then conservative-center government in Norway presented in 1999 a white paper on poverty in which its commitment to the welfare state was expressed through six basic goals:

- security for all
- improved distribution of incomes and living standards
- equal rights and obligations for all
- an equal range of high-quality services
- better opportunities for work for the most financially disadvantaged
- a more finely-meshed social safety net.³³

Even if the political systems ascertain their willingness to maintain strong public responsibility for the welfare system, there are several big challenges for the Norwegian welfare system. Among those that are often mentioned in media and in the public debates, are challenges connected to the rapid increase in the number of people receiving disability pension. This pension is granted to people who have lost their

³⁰ Ibid:10

³¹ Angell 2005:125

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

ability to earn their living. Together with an increasing percentage of early retirement and increasing sickness leave, these challenges are urgent for the political priorities because they increase public expenditure and also reduce the working population and thus the capacity to finance public welfare. Another challenge is related to poverty which is an increasing problem especially in the case of retired people with low pension and disadvantaged children, but also to groups of people coming to Norway from other European countries hoping to get a job but cannot compete on the labor market. As the standard of living improves and the people's life expectancy increases, there are challenges with an increasing number of elderly in the population and also the growing number of people with chronic illnesses.³⁴

The relations between the church and the state may be of different kinds, and there are several ways in which voluntary agents may be acting towards or cooperating with the public sector. The question for diakonia is always to find out what role diaconal activities as voluntary welfare agents may meaningfully have in the society.

The Coordination Reform of Health and Care Service

Several reforms from the Ministry of Health and Care services about health and social welfare have passed in the Norwegian Parliament the last years. One of them is called *Samhandlingsreformen* (Coordination Reform of Health Service).³⁵ The Coordination Reform points out that the goal for the patient is to receive the proper treatment, at the right place, in the right time, and for this to happen it is important to build up a better coordination between the existing systems; between local authorities and hospitals, between different professions, between agencies, within hospitals, within the local authorities, and between people as such. These are challenges that also include diaconal activities – both in institutions and in the parishes.

Two other white papers have followed up this reform. One is called *Innovation in Care Service*³⁶ and the other *Future Care*.³⁷

The health services in Norway are considered to be good compared to many other countries in the world, but a lack of contact between hospitals and local authorities is the principal obstacle to making the health service even better. The social inequalities in health care are growing in society. Many patients don't get the services they need, and this affects particularly the ill among the elderly, the chronically ill, children and young people, the mentally ill, patients in need of palliative medicine and those who are subtenure-dependent.

There is a long tradition for cooperation between the state and the church in Norway. During the Reformation, the state took on a lot of the responsibility for the welfare of the people that the church had upheld earlier. Today the church falls within

³⁴ Angell 2005:140-144

³⁵ St.meld nr.47 (2008-2009)

³⁶ NOU 2011:11

³⁷ Meld St. 29 (2012-2013)

the category that the reforms call the voluntary organizations representing the civil society. The reforms underline that church organizations are a great resource for the Norwegian society, also when it comes to areas where the official authorities have the responsibility. Through the parishes, organizations and institutions the churches are important actors on several welfare areas – especially when it comes to preventive work and the perspective of empowerment and life-quality.

These organizations have an important role in bringing forth the “unseen needs.” They have other conditions to develop and build networks. It is also seen as a value in itself that voluntary work gives people the experience of attending and experience the resources found in relations and in working together. The cooperation between voluntary organizations and the official authorities can be strengthened. It is expressed in the mentioned documents that health and care services should go much longer than just the medical measures. The diaconal traditions have strong experiences both through institutions and parish-work where employees and volunteers have developed relevant competence to support people in need in different parts of life. Diakonia has a calling from God to serve when loss of health and hardship destroy life, but also to prevent that something bad shall happen. It is important to cooperate in all ways that can help, support and strengthen a person, and the churches also represent a community of faith and hope.

The diaconal activities must not be isolated islands in the society. The plan document for diakonia recommends to seek cooperation “within the Church, with other churches, with organizations and institutions, with public services and also with groups representing other faiths. It is important to have a broad approach to diakonia.”³⁸ Cooperation is needed and gives a lot of new opportunities, and it must develop on different levels. In a report from 2005 about the connection between Church and Health³⁹, we can find some answers to what type of diaconal health-work the parishes in Norway are doing locally and how this work is part of an overall cooperation with the official actors. The mapping in the report also tells something about how the parishes look upon themselves as welfare agents, what they view as important matters and how they evaluate the relations between the church and the local society. The mapping shows that the cooperation between parishes and the public community consists of very different activities; from contact or cooperation in particular cases to more formalized cooperation over a longer period of time for example through the running of institutions, youth-cafés or central agencies for volunteers. All the parishes say in the research report that they cooperate with some official agency, and most say that they cooperate with homes for elderly people, schools and kindergartens. When it comes to more specialized official services, most parishes tell that they cooperate in the psychiatric field, in the care for mentally retarded people, with the agency for culture, with the police, with the homecare agency and other actors in the social welfare

³⁸ Church of Norway 2008:5

³⁹ Angell og Christoffersen 2005

system as such. Some parishes also tell that they cooperate with agencies for refugees, with institutions for drug addicts and child care departments.⁴⁰

Research that has been done later than 2005, shows that cooperative relations have developed further, and recent reports by Angell⁴¹ tell that the cooperation in situations of crises and sorrow are increasing. Likewise the focus on spiritual care for people in different situations is more in focus.

But still there are a lot of new possibilities and arenas for cooperation to develop. One area to focus even more is the activities of a more preventive character, such as networking, visitation to isolated and lonely persons etc. There are big challenges connected to the growing number of elderly people with special needs in an increasing multicultural and multireligious society, an increasing number of persons with mental illnesses etc. An interesting observation in this recent report is that there is often not so much *cooperation* in the sense of working together and being dependent upon each other, but more *information* from one instance to another.⁴² This tells us that there still are a lot of work to be done in developing and strengthen the relations between the parishes and the official agencies. More knowledge about each other is necessary, more dialogue and more mutual respect and acknowledgement. A responsible position for diakonia is to stand together with all people of good will in the caring for the basic values in our society. At the same time diakonia has to have a clear knowledge about its own standing, its possibilities and limitations.

There are also challenges inside the church and between different churches with regard to the cooperation. As mentioned earlier there are a certain distance between diaconal institutions and official church structures. Since many of the institutions are defined as a part of the official welfare and education system in the society today and are mainly financed through the general tax systems, their situation is different from the parishes. They work more directly in the multicultural and multireligious context when it comes to appointing employees and the work towards needy/patients/users. The cooperation between the institutions and the local parishes has a lot more potentials than we can see today. A good example of existing work in this field can be the cooperation between the hospital and the local congregations when the patient is returned home without having any relatives or friends to help them. The deacon or a volunteer from the local congregation comes to the person's home and help him/her to calm down there and follow up with some regular visits as long as the person wants this support.

Conclusion

The challenges for diakonia in the contemporary Norwegian society may be described in different ways. I have chosen to look at the challenges through the glasses

⁴⁰ Angell & Christoffersen 2005

⁴¹ Angell 2011

⁴² Angell 2010

of the Church of Norway's Plan for diakonia and the deacons. This means that I have had my starting point in the church, looking from the theological basis of diakonia which points to the very identity and mission of the Church. I have showed how the given definition of diakonia indicates how diaconal ministry should be challenged by the needs, resources and possibilities for cooperation locally and globally. Diakonia will always have a special responsibility in cases where nobody else takes care. I have pointed out that also in a welfare state like Norway there are lots of challenges for diaconal involvement both in parishes and in diaconal institutions and organizations.

In this article I have wanted to show how diakonia is developing in the Norwegian society, but also how it is influenced by being part of the world-wide church. I will close this article by using some thoughts from a document called *Diaconal Identity – Faith in Social Care* from Eurodiaconia, that sums up my main points. The document describes the need for diakonia to be in a continuous process to “find a language to describe our identity; a language which is not only internally understood but a language that will also work externally, enabling us to be more visible and understandable to all those who engage with us as users, funders and staff.”⁴³ This is a challenge for diakonia in our time. It is important to discuss further how the elements of identity can be put into practice based on leadership and communication, being willing to listen to the other and learn from the other. In order to have a clear engagement in society, the diaconal work needs to change as society changes. One cannot linger on old methods and ways; we must develop and innovate with the world in order to understand the world. A diaconal church must engage in global perspectives, such as environmental matters and demographic change. At the same time it must keep its core values in order to remain sustainable and trustworthy. As expressed in the document from Eurodiaconia: Through God's care and God's strength individuals and groups can be empowered to effect change, and be proactive in ensuring positive change and changing the reality for other people.⁴⁴

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⁴³ Eurodiaconia 2010:4

⁴⁴ Eurodiaconia 2010

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